

# **NORTH EAST IN BENTHIC ZONE**

**DHANABIR LAISHRAM**

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NORTH-EAST  
IN  
BENTHIC ZONE



DHANABIR LAISHRAM

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### North-East in Benthic Zone

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## PREFACE

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Many writers have analogised the current impasse in the region of North-East India as 'in-flame'. Even the question of Benthic location (Deep Sea) comes up. The question is why? It would be futile exercise if one tries to answer it without taking the trouble of studying the political economy of the region. The problem of underdevelopment in NE has assumed a complex political and cultural form. Basically, in the parlance of political economy, development is related both to a prevalent mode of production as well as reproduction of social relations of production. Therefore, the political economy of underdevelopment takes into account the social relations of production and its genesis in a given system of production. The region being a cultural and economic periphery of India's mainland exhibits relationship of dependency between the modes of production prevalent in NE and the modes of production prevalent in the larger domain of India's economy. The vivid evidence for this dependency relation lies in the fact that NE acts as a supplier of raw material for the mainland and in turn serves as a market for finished goods from the mainland. This process of resource use could unite all the markets of India including NE but left the people divided. It leads to heterogeneous, overlapping and formalism in social and political aspects of the region. This relationship with the Indian capital does not ensure the self-determination

of NE. Rather, it provides a space for operation of the Indian capital.

Such centre-states relationship seems to manifest India's power hegemony over the region in order to complete nation building processes which were coercive in nature. On the contrary the Indian capital gives rise to dominant ideology of subsumption of regional identities based on radical transformation of their societies. It shows that politically constructed identities resist the processes of dominance and homogenization. Such resistance is articulated as struggle for survival and sustenance. It is really antithesis of India's power hegemony. Even now, it is searching the historical importance and rights above of economic discontentment. In other words, in terms of "Political Economy" with the rise of dependency between NE and the mainland India, there has been a corresponding rise of resistance as its dialectical counterpart.

The corresponding rise of resistance to such hegemony is also fragmented. So the principle antagonistic contradiction could not be beyond the question. Moreover, economic dependency creates sub-peripheralization, i.e. peripheries within peripheries. Consequently, the values and the ideas which people hold about the nature of polity is completely based on relative deprivation without taking into account, the question of structural injustice. Such rational choices of major actors of NE compounded all the social and political fabric of the region. Here, one could assess that it may also be the form of contention.

Lastly, in the Benthic zone, i.e., the deepest part of the sea, the benthos in their struggle for survival have themselves evolved to have their own ray in order to find their survival needs in the dark which otherwise would

have become extinct due to starvation. It is metaphorsied with the armed struggle in the region which rises its head as an antithesis borne out of the unequal and exploitative treatment to the northeasterners meted out by the mainstream coupled with the power hegemony of the later. But as attentive public and applied intellectuals, we are duty-bound to seek solutions to such vexed problems of the region. The present work is a modest attempt to anticipate some fresh thinking on the resilient insurrections for higher political status experiencing in the region. Lastly, any proposition for possible solution to the impasse calls for sacrifice from the part either of the dialectical counter parts. In this book an alternative paradigm to the genesis of all these problems are put forward for consideration.

**DHANABIR LAISHRAM**

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# 1

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

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The states of North-East (NE) are late-comers into the mainstream of India. They are adjacent to various foreign countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, Bhutan and Nepal. In short 99 per cent of it is covered by international boundaries and the remaining one per cent is linked between NE and India at Siliguri, the chicken neck portion in the India's political map. The region is the composition of seven states constituted by Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>1</sup> Their combined population, according to the 2001 census, is 38.5 million and it represents 3.8 per cent of the total population of India. The total area of the region is 255,089 sq. km accounting for 8.05 per cent of the country's total area. The states along with their capitals and its areas (in sq. km) and languages are given in the table below:

Sl. No.	State	Capital	Area in sq. km	Major speaking languages
1.	Assam	Dispur	78,438	Assamese, Bengali Bodo, Karbi, Rabha, Dimasa
2.	Arunachal Pradesh	Itanagar	83,743	Monpa, Aka, Nishi
3.	Nagaland	Kohima	16,579	Aao, Konyak, Sema, Angami
4.	Manipur	Imphal	22,327	Manipuri
5.	Mizoram	Aizwal	21,087	Mizo
6.	Tripura	Agartala	10,486	Tripuri, Bengali
7.	Meghalaya	Shillong	22,429	Khasi, Garo

The so-called seven sister states of North-East constitute this family of "enchanted frontiers". As varied and different as the states are from each other, yet there is also a lot of similarity and common feature in their origin, stage of civilization, food habit, ancient customs and these beautiful land, best describe the North-East.

Assam is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal in the north; Nagaland and Manipur in the east; Bangladesh, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram in the South. The land of Assam consists of valleys and hills and mighty rivers like the Brahmaputra and Barak. Assam has a geographical area of 78,438 sq. km about 26,638,407 people comprising of 13,787,799 males and 12,850,608 females (2001 Census). The literacy rate stands at 64.28 per cent. The principal language of Assam is Assamese although a large number of other languages are spoken such as Bodo, Karbi, Rabha and Dimasa. Except for a narrow corridor running through the foothills of the Himalayas that connects the state with West Bengal, Assam is almost entirely isolated from India. The capital of Assam is Dispur, a suburb of Guwahati.

The name "Assam" is derived from the term "Axom" which, in Sanskrit, refers to unequal or unrivalled. The uneven topography of the land, full of hills, plains and rivers might, therefore, have contributed to her name. The Mongolian Ahom dynasty, which had ruled Assam for more than six hundred years, might also be the cause for her name. Assam is a land with an illustrious recorded history going back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. Assam was an independent kingdom throughout all of history till the end of the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the British conquered the Kingdom and annexed it to British India.

Assam is an agricultural state. Agriculture accounts for the livelihood of about four-fifths of its people in

Assam. The principal food crop is rice. Cash crops such as jute, tea, cotton, oilseeds and sugarcane are also grown. It is also known for her forest wealth with varieties of flora and fauna.

Assam has two important physical regions – the Barak valley and the Brahmaputra valley. The state is characterized by heavy rainfall varying between 178 and 305 cm., usually during the months from June to September every year. Thus, it suffers from both floods and landslide. It has a total area of 78,438 sq.km and one-fourth of which is forest area. It is divided into 23 districts. The total population of the state is 2.66 crores as per 2001 census. The density of population is 340 persons per sq.km., the highest in the North-Eastern Region. The state has 37,652 schools.

The natural resources of the state include rich mineral wealth like coal, limestone, refractory clay, dolomite and natural gas. Petroleum and petroleum products, tea and natural gases generate considerable revenues for India.

Assam is famous for producing 15.6 per cent of the world's tea and 55 per cent of India's tea production in about 750 tea plantations. Other industries include fertilizers, sugar, jute, silk, paper, plywood, rice mills and oil drilling and a number of cottage industries including handloom, sericulture, bamboo and cane and brass utensils have also come up in the state. The per capita income in 1998-99 at 1993-94 prices was Rs.5587, which is quite low among the North Eastern states.<sup>2</sup>

To the southeast of Assam lies the equally enchanted state of Manipur, a land of vitality and sports which possess rich martial culture and tradition. The

game of polo is accepted world wide to have been conceived out of the mud of the state. The state is of unique distinction for having the Meetei Vaishnavites, the Meeteis Sanamahi, Meetei Pangal, along with the ethnically distinctive 33 recognised scheduled tribes and many other in the category of unspecified list. These ethnic tribes are categorized into two groups known as Manipuri Nagas and Manipuri Kukis. No doubt, there are non-Naga or non-Kuki tribes.

Manipur, literally meaning "A Jeweled land" nestle deep within a lush green corner of North East India. It seems much like an exquisite work of art executed by superb hands of nature and is indeed a state of exquisite natural beauty and splendour, the beauty of which once inspired Mrs. St. Clair Grimwood describes it as "A Pretty Place more beautiful than many show places of the world". The terrain in the state is predominantly hilly, except a broad central valley extending to about 1800 sq. km. The average altitude of the hilly region is upto 3,000m. The Imphal and the Barak rivers flowing in southern direction form the main drainage system.

Manipur has Nagaland to its north, Mizoram to its south, upper Myanmar to its east, and Cachar district of Assam to its west. The total area of the state is 22,327 sq. km out of which more than 27 per cent constitutes forests. The total population of the state is 23.88 lakh-12.07 lakh males and 11.81 lakh females. The rate of growth of population during 1991-2001 was 30.02 per cent. The literacy rate of the state (2001 census) was 68.87 percent, with female literacy of 59.70 per cent and male literacy of 77.87 per cent. The sex ratio in the state is 978 females per 1000 males. The population density is 107 per sq.km.

The per capita income in the state in 1998-99 at 1993-94 prices was only Rs.7132. The state thus shows a contrast in its literacy status and sex ratio which are better than the national average while it has a very low utilization of human resources.<sup>3</sup>

Manipur became a union territory in 1956 and a full-fledged state in 1972. It has nine districts. The handloom industry is the biggest employer in the state with more than three lakh persons employed at its three lakh spindles. The 5970 small-scale industrial units provide employment to about 24,000 workers. The silk industries (Tassar Silk) has considerable potential in providing employment to the state's population in its various stages, including mulberry-raising.<sup>4</sup>

Little is known about the early history of what is now Nagaland, including the origin of several large sandstone pillars at Dimapur. The British rule was established over the area by the 1890s, and head-hunting, then a traditional practice, was outlawed. The Naga territory remained split between Assam and the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). After Indian independence in 1947, despite a vocal movement advocating the political union of all the Naga tribes; one faction called for sovereignty. In 1957, following violent incidents, the Indian government established a single Naga administrative unit under Indian rule. In 1960, the Indian government agreed to make Nagaland a self-governing state within India. The state of Nagaland was formally inaugurated on 1st December, 1963, as the 16th State of the Indian Union.

Nagaland has Myanmar to its east, Manipur to its south, Assam to its west and north, and Arunachal Pradesh to its north-east. It has a total area of 16,579



sq.km out of which more than half of it is covered by forests. It has a population density of 120 persons per sq.km. The total population of 19.88 lakh comprises 10.4 lakh males and 9.5 lakh females. The population has grown by 64.4 per cent in the decade prior to 2001. The sex ratio is 909 females to 1000 males. The literacy rate in the state is 67.1 per cent with male literacy of 72.0 per cent and female literacy of 62.0 per cent. Nagaland has eight districts where enhanced terraced cultivation, farm forestry, crechard plantation, and case crops plantation are done as livelihood means. A number of agro- and forest-based industries has come up in the state. It has a low per capita income of Rs.10,287 (in 1997-98 at 1993-94 prices).<sup>5</sup>

Nagaland, though tiny in its territory, has pride of its numerous warrior tribes, who tax independence more valuable than life. A distinctive feature of the people is their racial homogeneity, despite a wide diversity with respect to tongue and tradition, and as sheltered under the Naga umbrella.

Mizoram is bordering Myanmar in the East and South and Bangladesh in the West. The terrain is hilly and mostly undulating with average altitude ranging from 500 to 800 m and maximum reaching 2,157 m in Blue Mountains. The Chhimtuipui is the only major river. Aizwal is its capital. The average rainfall is 2500 mm.

Perching on the high hills of North-eastern corner, Mizoram is a storehouse of natural beauty hills its endless variety of landscape, hilly, terrains, meandering streams, deep gorges, rich wealth of flora and fauna.

Mizoram is a mountainous region which became the 23rd state of the Union in February 1987. It was one of the districts of Assam till 1972 when it became Union

Territory. Flanked by Bangladesh on the west and Myanmar on the east and south, Mizoram occupies an important strategic position having a long international boundary of 722 km with Myanmar and Bangladesh. Mizoram has the most variegated hilly terrain in the eastern part of India. The hills are steep and are separated by rivers which flow either to the north or the south creating deep gorges between the hill ranges. The average height of the hills is about 900 metres. The highest peak in Mizoram is the Phawngpui (Blue Mountain) with a height of 2210 metres. Mizoram has a pleasant climate. It is generally cool in summer and not very cold in the winter. Mizoram has great natural beauty and an endless variety of landscape and is very rich in flora and fauna. Almost all kinds of tropical trees and plants thrive in Mizoram. The hills are marvelously green. Mizos are closely knit society with no class distinction and no discrimination on ground of sex. The entire society is knit together by a peculiar code of ethics "Tlawmngaihna" implying to be hospitable kind, unselfish and helpful to others from each one.

Historians believe that the Mizos are a part of the great wave of the Mongolian race spilling over into the eastern and southern India centuries ago. The sojourn in Western Burma, into which they eventually went around the seventh century, is estimated to last about two centuries. They came under the influence of the British Missionaries in the 9th century, and now most of the Mizos are Christians. One of the beneficial result of Missionary activities was the spread of education. The Missionaries introduced the Roman script for the Mizo language and formal education. The cumulative result literacy rate is as high as 95 percentage which is considered to be highest in India. The Mizos are a distinct

community and the social unit is the village. Around it revolves the life of a Mizo. Mizo village is usually set on the top of a hill with the chief's house at the centre and the bachelor's dormitory called *Zawlbuk*, prominently. In a way the focal point in the village was the *Zawlbuk* where all young bachelors of the village slept. *Zawlbuk* was the training ground and indeed, the cradle wherein the Mizo youth was shaped into a responsible adult member of the society.

Mizoram has a total area of 21,087 sq.km of which 61.72 per cent is covered by forests. It has a population of 3.9 lakh - 4.6 lakh males and the 4.3 lakh females. The population in the state grew during 1991-2001 by 29.18 per cent. The sex ratio is 924 females to 1000 males. It has a high literacy rate of 88.5 per cent with male literacy of 90.7 per cent and female literacy of 86.13 per cent. Its population density is 42 persons per sq.km.<sup>6</sup>

Mizoram became a full-fledged state in 1987. It is divided into three districts, and sub-divisions, with three autonomous hill district councils. There are altogether six towns and 301 village councils. The per capita income in the state in 1990-91 at current prices was Rs., 4451. Handloom and handicrafts constitute few major industrial activities and industries such as ginger, beverages, edible oil, and fruits preservation are growing rapidly.

Tripura is surrounded by Bangladesh on all sides excepting the narrow portion in the North-East which borders Assam and Mizoram. It has a total area of 10,486 sq.km of which nearly 60 per cent is covered by forests. The state has a total population of 31.4 lakh with 16.3 lakh males and 15.6 lakh females. The

population grew by 15.7 per cent over a period of 10 years before 2001. It has a sex ratio of 950 females to 1000 males. The density of population is 304 per sq. km next to Assam in the entire north-eastern region.<sup>7</sup>

The literacy rate in Tripura is 73.7 per cent with 81.5 per cent male literacy rate and 65.4 per cent female literacy. The state administration is divided into four districts, ten administrative sub-divisions, 177 tehsils and 5215 villages. It has 49 tea gardens covering an area of 55.27 lakh hectares. Handloom constitutes the major industrial activity in the state. There is a network of primary weavers' co-operative societies supported by an Apex society. The per capita income of the state is only Rs. 6,214 (in 1998-99 at 1993-94 prices).<sup>8</sup>

In olden days, Tripura was a proud kingdom ruled by a succession of 183 Tripuri Prince who held sway over a land whose history is etched over centuries in the *Rajmala*, the state chronicle. On the eve of partition, a part of Tripura plain was inhabited by Muslims, though the overall demographic position was over-whelming Tripuri nationality. With the creation of East Pakistan, Tripura was virtually isolated. Tripura merged with India on 15<sup>th</sup> October, 1949, and she became a Part C state with the inauguration of the new Constitution on 26<sup>th</sup> January, 1950 and subsequently a union territory in November 1956, attaining statehood only in January 1972.

With the influx of refugees from Bangladesh, migration was running at the rate of 10,000 a month.<sup>9</sup> The inexorable pressures of the migrant population soon found themselves being pushed into less hospitable lands in the hilly interiors. In short, the indigenous people are Tripura nationality, who recently have found themselves outnumbered by refugee Bengalis who have become the dominant majority and have taken over the running of the state.

The state of Arunachal Pradesh is located in North-east India and comprises an area of 83,743 sq.km. Itanagar is the capital of Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal Pradesh which is separated from Tibet by the Himalayan range stretching over 600 kilometres along the mountain range from east to west. The proportions of the state reinforced the argument for an additional time zone. With spectacular Himalayan views it has numerous famous planes like the Bomdi La and the Nathu La, providing assessing routes to neighbouring Bhutan and massive China. Even today China claims the state as disputed land with India. Its people present a fascinating mix of Tibeto-Burmese origin with about fifty different dialects. This state is regarded as the most peaceful place in the region, with Mizoram and Meghalaya running close to second and the third.

The state has 13 districts, and a substantial part of it is covered by mountains except for thin strips of land, most part of which adjoin Assam. More than two-thirds of the total area is forest; Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute 79 per cent of its populations. As per the 2001 census, the state has a total population of 10.96 lakh; 5.79 lakh males and 5.17 lakh females. The population grew by 26.21 per cent during 1991-2001. The sex ratio is 901 females to 1000 males. The literacy rate is 54.74 per cent – the male literacy rate in 64.07 and the female literacy rate is only 44.24 per cent. The per capita income of the state by 1998-99 estimated at 1993-94 prices was Rs. 8,001. The density of population in the state is 13 persons per sq.km which is the lowest in the entire North-Eastern Region. Arunachal Pradesh was accorded the status of a union territory on 20 January 1972 and that of a state on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1987.

The state holds considerable potential in hydel power. More than 80 per cent of its population is, however, engaged in agriculture, especially in jhumming or shifting cultivation. Crops are raised by clearing forests and are usually sown one to three times a year, depending on the fertility of the soil. The main crops are rice, maize, millet, wheat, and mustard. There is a potential for significant growth of forest-based industries including saw mills, ply-wood and veneer mills, rice mills, fruit preservation units, oil expellers, and so on. Handloom and handicrafts industry is another area where the state holds considerable revenue and employment potential. Since 1992, the tourism industry has registered impressive growth.

It would be noteworthy to note that the state lags behind the national average in terms of literacy level for both males and females, sex ratio, per capita income, and many other parameters. The pattern of distribution of workers across diverse work sectors indicates that more than 80 per cent of the workforce is still confined to the primary sector, and agriculture.<sup>10</sup>

In Arunachal Pradesh, the people may be broadly divided into three cultural groups on the basis of their socio-religious affinities. The Monpas and Sherdukpens of Tawang and West Kameng districts follow the Lamaistic tradition of Mahayana Buddhism. Noted for their religious fervour, their villages have richly decorated Buddhist temples, locally called *Gompas*. Though largely agriculturists practising terrace cultivation, many of these people are also pastoral and breed herds of yak and mountain sheep. Culturally similar to them are Membas and Khambas who live in the high mountains along the northern borders.

Khamptis and Singphos inhabiting the eastern part of the state are Buddhists. They are said to have migrated from Thailand and Burma long ago and their ancient scripts brought from their original homeland are still in use.

The second group of people are Adis, Akas, Apatanis, Bangnis, Nishis, Mishmis, Mijis, Thongsas etc., who worship Sun and Moon God namely. Donyi-Polo and Abo-Tani, the original ancestors for most of these tribes. Their religious rituals, largely coincide with phases of agricultural cycles. They invoke nature deities and make animal sacrifices. They traditionally practise jhumming or shifting cultivation. Adis and Apatanis extensively practise rice cultivation and have an agricultural economy. Apatanis are famous for their paddy-cum-pisciculture. They are specialised over centuries in harvesting two crops of fish along with each crop of paddy.

The third group comprises Noctes and Wanchos, adjoining Nagaland in the Tirap District. They are hardly people known for their strictly structured village society in which hereditary village chief still plays a vital role. The Noctes also practise an elementary form of Vaishnavism.

The state of Meghalaya is situated on the north-east of India. It extends for about 300 km in length and about 100 km in breadth. It is bounded on the north by Goalpara, Kamrup and Nowgong districts, on the east by Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts, all of Assam, and on the south and west by Bangladesh. Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya is located at an altitude of 1496 metres above sea level.

Emergence of Meghalaya as an autonomous state on 2nd April 1970 and as a full-fledged state on 21st January 1972 marked the beginning of a new era of the geo-political history of North-eastern India. Shillong, which was made Assam's capital in 1874, remained so till January 1972, following the formation of Meghalaya. The capital city derives its name from the manifestation of the creator called Shillong.

Meghalaya is the homeland, mainly, of the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos. The Garos inhabit western Meghalaya, the Khasis in central Meghalaya, and the Jaintias in eastern Meghalaya. The Khasi, Jaintia, Bhoi, War, collectively known as the Hynniewtrep people predominantly inhabit the districts of east of Meghalaya, also known to be one of the earliest ethnic group of settlers in this region, belonging to the Proto-Austroloid Monkhmer race. The Garo Hills is predominantly inhabited by the Garos, belonging to the Bodo family of the Tibeto-Burman race, said to have migrated from Tibet. The Garos call themselves Achik-manda. In the Garo language *Achik* means Hills and *mands* meaning man. So, Achik-mande means the Hills people.

The Khasis inhabit the eastern part of Meghalaya, in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The Khasis residing in Jaintia hills are now better known as Jaintias. They are also called Pnars. The Khasis occupying the northern lowlands and foothills are generally called Bhois. Those who live in the southern tracts are termed Wars.

Again among the wars, those living in the Khasi are called War-Khasis and those in the Jaintia Hills, War-Pnars or War-Jaintias. In the Jaintia Hills Khyrswangs, Labangs, Nangphlutes, Nangtungs inhabit in the northeastern part and in the east. In the Khasi Hills



the Lyngngams live in the north western part. But all of them claim to have descended from the 'Ki Hynniw Trep' and are now known by the generic name of Khasi-Pnars or simply Khasis. They have the same traditions, customs and usages with a little variation owing to geographical divisions.<sup>11</sup>

Meghalaya, which literally means 'Abode of the Clouds', more than lives up to its reputation – a land of scenic beauty with waterfalls, rivulets, hills and takes in the heart of Shillong. This was the erstwhile British capital of undivided Assam, educational nucleus and seat of government for the entire province up to 1970, when the state was formed. Meghalaya's distinctive tribes – Khasi, Jaintia and Garo are some of the few remaining matrilineal societies in the world. A democratic way of life and rules of democratic propriety are features that have been handed down through the ages. The people are jovial, with a rare absence of institutional caste barriers and an accepted equality of the sexes.

Meghalaya has total area of 22,429 sq.km. of which 46.24 per cent is covered by forests. The total population of 23.06 lakh includes 11.67 lakh male and 11.38 lakh female. The population grew by 29.94 per cent in the decade 1991-2001. It has a sex ratio of 975 females per 1000 males. The literacy rate as per 2001 census was 63.31 per cent, the male literacy rate 66.14 per cent and female literacy rate is 60.41 per cent.<sup>12</sup>

The state is shown at a higher level than the national average in terms of sex ratio and female literacy rates. However, it lags behind in terms of overall literacy and male literacy: the population growth rate is also higher than the national rate during the correspondent period. Another area of concern is the low per capita income of

Rs.7,606 in 1998-99 at 1993-94 prices. Agriculture is the primary source of income for the workers in the five districts in the state. The state has launched a jhum control scheme to encourage the people to undertake cultivation on improved land through the supply of fertilizers, seeds, irrigation, and other facilities. The industrial base in the state is beginning to grow with industries such as ply wood edible oil, limestone, mining and cement.

These are the face values of all these seven states, in reality many are frustrated and helpless in the face of pressures similar to those in other parts of the fourth world.<sup>13</sup> Drugs and Alcohol are major concerns as having right to euthanaia.<sup>14</sup> The lack of development in the whole state, due in part to its geographic isolation, government's long term negligence and the influx of population from neighbouring countries is increasing cases of violence and unrest. Ethnic differences are being emphasised more and more as competition for jobs, trade, and rights increases. Besides, step motherly treatment of union government breed many insurgency groups and showing political aspiration of self-determination. But some are external self-determination and some are at stake for internal self-determination.<sup>15</sup> That means emerging of internal contradiction can be seen. The question is why? The answer should be given after analyzing the history of British colonialism and India's democratic political system towards the states of NE India. So, it is better to see the territorial development of NE with the two external forces of British and India in the past and present political process.

### **Territorial Administrative Complexes**

The three valleys surrounded by blue mountain ranges constitute the sensitive region known as

northeastern India. The blue hills comprised by the eastern Himalayas on the north, the Naga and Manipur hills on the east, the Mizo and Tripura hills on the south and the Shillong plateau (named in the thirties by the Indian geographer, S.P. Chatterji, as Meghalaya) on the west, form almost completely natural boundaries of the Brahmaputra valley, the heartland of Assam. The district of Cachar is lying beyond the Shillong plateau. Between the naga hills (of Nagaland) and the chin hills (of Burma) is situated in the Manipur valley with an altitude of about 3000 ft.

The changes in NE India whether in the direction of positive or negative, constructive or destructive, these were caused by the external forces as well as the existing geographical factors. In the conventional form, location was critical to the development of administrative forms in the region. The formidable Himalayan ranges in the north and the east; gradual undulating Brahmaputra plains; and the plateaus and isolated hills in the south and west, all played a significant role. The former provided adequate barriers against invasions from the north and east. While the latter provided strategic defensive positions, the region developed in isolation.<sup>16</sup>

The southern and western boundaries of the region were prone to invasions, as they permitted easy access. In fact, the region became receptive as waves of population groups gradually settled down. Invasional/migrations and resultant territorial adjustments continued well up to the first half of the nineteenth century.

‘The province of Assam at the far northeastern corner of India is a museum of nationalities’, wrote J.B. Fuller in 1909.<sup>17</sup> Of these, the Garos living in the western part

of the Meghalaya plateau have a legend of having migrated from the northwest, that is, the southern side of central Tibet.<sup>18</sup> The Khasi, at least some of them, claim to have migrated from Southeast Asia, part of their route probably passing through Burma.<sup>19</sup> The Kuki and the Chin inhabiting the southern hills of Manipur, Tripura and most of the Mizo hills are supposed to be from Southern China.<sup>20</sup> They are also believed to have contributed to the basic linguistic strain of the Meetei who inhabit the Manipur valley.<sup>21</sup> The Naga, settled in Nagaland and the northern hills of Manipur, and some of the groups in the northeast frontier are mostly assumed to be immigrants from eastern Tibet, whereas most of the inhabitants of the "sub-Himalayan and cis-Himalayan" areas trace their origin directly from Southern Tibet.<sup>22</sup>

When the Lushai tribes (the Mizos) eventually displaced the Kukis and others from the present-day Mizoram in the 1840s. This was besides the impact of the immigrants, who moved into the region with the British annexation of the area in 1826. These elements with different points of entry and time produced a complicated mix of population content. In a sense, the region was balkanized and exhibited homogeneity amidst heterogeneity.

The resultant dichotomy introduced by the internal territorial distinctions between the population groups proved to be tenacious in the accentuated micro differences. With expanding administrative influences, there emerged distinct contradictions in spatial organisation of space. This did not relate itself to the geographical phenomena. These distinctions later proved to be politically meaningful.

### **Evolution of the Region**

A miniature replica of the country, the region maintained international and national contact through the Brahmaputra valley and the Cachar plains. These were reinforced by territorial and topographical distinctions that were channelised to repel and resist invasions; thereby, the fortunes of the hills and plains were inextricably woven together.

The region was broadly divided into the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys along with Cachar, Manipur, Tripura, Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills. North Cachar-Mikir-Mizo hills and parts of the North East Frontier Agency were also included. At times, the region extended well up to North Bengal and East Bengal up to the sea. The region at the beginning of the nineteenth century had an area of approximately 60,000 sq.km. and included all the dependencies and conquered territories in or beyond the mountainous limits that surrounded the Brahmaptura valley in every direction. This area was divided to represent 'Uttarakhol' – the northern bank territories, 'Dakhanikhol' or the south bank territories and the island of Majuli. Besides it was also divided on east west basis, with Kaliabor as the dividing point between the lower and upper Brahmaputra valley. This aspect is important because, upper Brahmaputra valley became the core of the various powers that later went on to carve out an empire in the region. This historical instance was reinforced by the British, who found in the area, factors conducive to further their strategic and commercial interests. As a result, this section dominated by Dibrugarh-Tinsukia axis even today retains its importance in the very fact of regional economic activities.<sup>23</sup>

This suggested that there was a definite pattern of movement-displacement control-decline process. These reflected the changing perception of space and the possible roles of the disruptive elements in the region's human geography. Through these super-impositions, the process of territorial alignment and fixation were slow, these were in place by the time of British annexation of the region in 1826.<sup>24</sup>

The movement into the region was from the north and north-east and at times from the south-eastern corners of the region. These were opposite to the developments that gradually penetrated the region from the south-west and west. Yet, one can clearly identify the pattern of territorial adjustment that has taken place in the region to largely compromise:

- i) The Cacharis and the Ahoms along with the Bodos in the Brahmaputra valley;
- ii) The Tibeto-Burman group along with the peripheral mountain systems; and
- iii) The Mon-Khmer groups south of the valley.

It can also be added here that continuous pressure exerted by the successive waves of migrants into the region forced the previous inhabitants to move into the mountain vastness adjacent to the valley. Here, in the inaccessible and isolated terrain, these populations perpetuated their traditional socio-political transactions. Later, after 1826, these were reinforced by administrative measures. This duality in policy frameworks is evident even today. This became the trend setter that led to the fragmentation of the geographical entity that was the North-East.<sup>25</sup>

### **Territorial Development**

Before the advent of the Ahoms in the early part of the thirteenth century, the region was shared by –

1. The Bodo-Shan groups of Chutiyas, east of Subansiri and Dihing rivers;
2. Bodo-Shan related groups controlling the areas south of (1);
3. The Kacheri kingdom to the west of 1 and 2 included parts of the present day Sibsagar and eastern Nagaon districts of Assam;
4. West of the Kacheri kingdom was the land of the Bhujias;
5. West of the Bhujia country and the rest was the kingdom of Kamrupa river in its western boundary.

Ahom belonging to the Tai group entered the region from the passes across the Himalaya in the north-eastern parts.<sup>26</sup> They crossed the Patkai range and established themselves in the south-eastern corner of upper Brahmaputra plains (in the area around present day Sibsagar district). In the subsequent three centuries, they displaced the Morans, the Borahis, the Nagas and the original inhabitants of the valley. In the process, they were able to extend effective control over Brahmaputra valley and a nominal control over the adjacent hill territories. In the later half of the seventeenth century, they came into open confrontation with the Mughal India. This enabled them to extend effective control over the lower Brahmaputra valley. The Ahoms control the area through series of forts and trading system. These networks became the carriers of socio-economic and political penetration in different

corners of the region. Religio-cultural structure was dominated by feudalism which also supplied necessary man power at the time of war. These aspects took firmer roots with vernacularisation. On the whole, the Ahom power was based on agriculture and its stability depended on the valley. It encouraged the growth of sub-regional power centres.

The decline of the Ahoms coincided with the emergence of Manipur and Upper Burma as rival contending centers. The Singpos along with the Patkai range wrested control of the area east of river Burhi Dihing in 1794. Likewise the Khamptis established themselves along with the river Tegapani and extended their control over the frontier tracts along Sadiya.

Burmese interest in the region increased with the annexation of eastern and southern parts in 1762. They made their intentions clear with the intervention in the internecine struggle of the Ahoms as well as through their footholds in East Bengal. Part of the frontier mountain inhabitants joined the Burmese. As a consequence of the intervention, many Ahom areas were subjected to wholesale depopulation, collapse of agricultural and industrial bases and general neglect. This coincided with British intervention in 1823.

David Scott, the energetic frontier man of the East India Company, was appointed judge and magistrate of Rangpur, the northeastern district of Bengal in December 1812. In 1813, the company lost its monopoly over Indian trade. A greater trading contact with China, provided by the Sea of Canton, became an imperative necessity. The search for additional trade in Assam was a part of this need. The Gurkha war of 1814-16 opened western Tibet through the acquisition of new territories to the west of



Nepal, and the emphasis on Bhuttan for a route to Tibet was weakened for a while. But the eastward expansion continued. In September 1816, Scott was appointed as the Governor-General's Agent to the North-East Frontier in addition to his post as joint magistrate of Rangpur and commissioner of Cooch Behar, with the duty of exercising a general control and superintendence over political relations and intercourse with the petty states in that quarters' including Sikkim, Bhutan, Tibet, Cooch Behar, Bijni, Assam, Cachar, Manipur and Jaintia.<sup>27</sup>

While Scott was engaged in bringing the cotton producing Garos under British authority, a great opportunity opened up in Assam and Manipur with the beginning of internecine conflicts in the royal families of Assam and Manipur. Burmese intervention in these conflicts, and the worsening of Anglo-Burmese relations. The military defeat of Burma and the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 led to the renunciation of Burmese claims on the territories of Assam and its dependencies and also with the contiguous petty states of Cachar and Jyntea. According to the official British interpretation, the Assam hills west of Patkoi range of mountains came under British possession by virtue of the treaty.<sup>28</sup> In 1852 lower Burma was annexed. In 1862 the ceded territories of Burma were constituted into a chief commissioners province. On 1 January 1886, upper Burma was annexed to it.<sup>29</sup>

In 1826, David Scott was appointed as senior commissioner of Assam in addition to his existing role. A Junior Commissioner was posted for upper Assam. Scott's advice for restoration of upper Assam to a subordinate monarchy, with a view to pacifying the Assamese gentry, was accepted by the Supreme

Government after a series of revolts had taken place and the position of the East India Company had become shaky in England. In 1833, Prince Purandar Singh was installed but was replaced in 1838 on a vague charge of 'mal-administration'. In 1842, Sadiya and the Mutlock territory (Dibrugarh) also were annexed, extending direct British rule over the entire Brahmaputra valley. The Cachar plain was annexed in 1832 and its northern hills in two instalments, in 1839 and 1854. Manipur, however, was not annexed.

In the wake of the Burmese attack, the British extended 'protection' to the Jaintia King and secured, from the *siem* (chief) of Nongkhlow, Tirot Singh, permission for the construction of a sanatorium and a road from Sylhet to Kamrup through his territory. But later Tirot Singh grew suspicious of the British intention. He was joined in his resistance to the penetration by some other Khasi Chiefs in 1829, but was crushed in 1829, two years after Scott's death. The Khasi chiefs had to enter into subordinate alliances with the British government and in all surrendered 31 villages to the British. In 1835, the Jaintia king was removed and his territory merged with British India. The Khasi chiefship were reduced to 25 in number under four kinds of chiefs' *siem*, *wahadadar*, *sirdar* and *lyngdoh*.<sup>30</sup>

Once the organised states in the region were brought under British control, the subordination of the turbulent hill people was a matter of time. Cotton, minerals, wild rubber and wild tea held out prospects for profit from the hills. Shortly after 1826, exploration for coal started in Assam. Though petroleum was discovered, it was not until 1865 that experimental drilling was initiated (shortly after that, Assam became a chief commissioner's province). Tea

received the most immediate attention. By 1830, uncertainty appeared in the East India Company's trade with China, the supplier of indigenous tea was reported from the Singpho area, and during the Anglo-Burmese war a Scottish soldier, Robert Bruce, learnt its preparation from Singpho Chief, tea plantation was planned only after the annexation of upper Assam in 1838. Meanwhile, a bid to import tea seeds from China was unsuccessful but a few Chinese plantation workers who reached Assam were employed under Charles Bruce, brother of Robert Bruce to develop tea plants. In 1838, Assam tea was opened for private competition and Bruce was sacked.<sup>31</sup> The spread of the tea gardens from the middle of the nineteenth century strengthened the case for a 'forward policy' on the hills.

With this consolidation, activities were concentrated to bring the inhabitants of the mountain sections under active administration. Area below the Paktai range, inhabited by Singhpos, Khamptis, Mihirs, eastern Nagas and others was incorporated in 1843.<sup>32</sup> The Rengma Nagas and the Mihirs occupying the tract south of Naogong and west of Patkai were brought under control between 1838 and 1848. In 1866, the Angami country along with the watershed area of river Doyang was annexed. The headquarters was re-located at Samguting. In 1879, the district headquarters was moved to Kohima. By 1889, the entire Aao Naga country was brought under British administration! Lastly in 1890, British conquered Manipur after having a big war at Khongjom. It was known to the Manipuris, as "the war of independence of Manipur". The Manipuris fought against the British for a good number of days in four battlefields. In this war, many British officers were killed. But the powerful British conquered Manipur after defeating Paona Major

General and his soldiers in the battlefield of Khongjom on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1891.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the British with active forward policy from 1839 onwards, were able to establish their control over the area. To a large extent in the initial stages they followed the Ahom administrative pattern. Administration was extended in planned phases with frequent resource to the existing systems. However, by 1863, in order to have better supervisory control, the administrative headquarters of this province was shifted from Rangpur and Cachar to Cherrapunji and Shillong. In 1873, Inner Line policy was introduced, and with the exception of the Garo, the Khasi and the Jaintia hills, all other units were brought under its preview.

It is necessary to note that until the British advent, the notion of territorial or political authority was unknown in the hills. Thus, the frontier between the sub-Himalayan and cis-Himalayan British territory and Tibet was fixed only with the drawing of the Mc Mahon Line in 1914. To the south of the Surma valley, the Chin-Lushai hills, 'a tract of most intricate hill ranges and impenetrable cane-brakes' was terra incognita before 1839.<sup>34</sup> Premberton reported that the Lushai country east of Tripura had once been under the control of the ruler of Tripura.<sup>35</sup> But Mackenzie held that Tripura's authority over the Lushai had never been settled or absolute.<sup>36</sup> Probably, depending upon the feuds, the fluctuating strength and the mobility of the hill people, the rulers of Tripura, Cachar, Manipur and Burma controlled parts of the region from time to time. Consequently, the British advance on the hills was from all these sides. In 1777, for the first time a friendly Chief in the Chittangong Hill Tract sought British assistance

against Kuki raids. Successive raids on the gardens, and punitive measures since 1869 led to the Lushai expeditions of 1871-72 and 1889 after which the hills were brought under rule.

### **Formation of Political Organisation**

Consequent to annexation and consolidation of the region (1826) colonial administrators made constant territorial readjustments, so much so that from 1826 to 1873, Assam became a part of Bengal. With the addition of the districts of Goalpara, Sylhet and Cachar, it became a separate province in 1874. All the new territories inhabited by the intermediary tribes were in stages included in the province, like that of the present day Nagaland, Mizoram etc. or were brought under the purview of the native rulers like those of Manipur who administered the areas occupied by the western Naga tribes for the colonial administrators. However, under the Curzon Plan of partition of Bengal Province, Assam and adjacent territories were once again brought under common nomenclature of East Bengal and Assam Province. Later, with its annulment, the region got its own independent administrative identity in 1912.<sup>37</sup>

Be that as it may be, these changes resulted in the region comprising of-

- a) Assam with the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang, Sibsagar, and Lakhimpur, the Barak-Surma valley (Sylhet and Cachar Districts); the Khasi the Jaintia the Naga and the Lushai hill districts,
- b) The native kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura; and

- c) The North Eastern frontier Tracts or the present day state of Arunachal Pradesh governed by the administrative head of the province for the centre.

This process of territorial adjustments over time and space, gave the region its unique characteristics of heterogeneity. This later aspect extended its influences on various regional activities in the form of variation in socio-political and economic representation and participation of the population groups and sub-groups. To this complex milieu, the influx of population from the Gangetic delta complicated the inter-group relations in the region. Very much different from other areas of NE India, in Manipur, a good number of notable movements were launched by the people against the feudalism and colonial administration of the British. They were Women Agitation I (1904), Thoubal Lal in 1912, Kuki Rebellion 1917 to 1919, Zadonang movement from 1921 to 1929, Irawat Movement from 1932 to 1951 and Women Agitation II of 1939.<sup>38</sup>

Post-partition developments saw the expressed fear of the inhabitants of the North East region of absorption and dominance. Large-scale influx of immigrants and dominance of regional activity by the plain inhabitants reinforced this. This resulted in the accentuation of the ideological and political differences within the region. Moreover, some of the policies, such as the language bill, were responsible in alienating the different population groups from each other.

The initial response that latter paved way for eventual administrative re-organisation of states in the region, was in the form of autonomy demanded by the Naga tribal groups in the eastern corner of the region.

Though the subsequent developments in this context are outside the purview of the present analysis, suffice it to say that insurgency in Nagaland speeded up the reorganisation of states. Parts of Naga inhabited areas in south-eastern Arunachal Pradesh, Tuensang area and Naga Hills were merged together and formed the state of Nagaland. This came into effect in 1963. The language bill of Assam became the focus of controversy. This led to the formation of the state of Meghalaya in 1972 (in 1969, the districts of Garo Hills and Untied Khasi and Jaintia Hills became a sub-autonomous unit within Assam state), Lushai Hills from a district became a Union Territory in 1972; Manipur and Tripura from a Union Territory status became full-fledged states in 1972, and the North-Eastern Frontier Agency (prior to 1954, it was known as the North-Eastern frontier tracts) was redesignated as the Arunachal Pradesh and became a Union Territory in 1972.

Thus, the North Eastern India, the name given by British, with the spirit of divide and rule policy in order to accentuate the voluminous contradiction among the people of the region emerged. The same was replicated by India by operating different laws within one state, having tendencies of assertion of national interest and denying reaction of it. In short, the two external forces kept up the people of NE in the frying pan.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Today NE India consists of eight states including Sikkim. Border line and the length (roughly) between: Assam-Bhutan 500 km, Arunachal Pradesh-China 117 km, AP-Burma 525 km, Bangladesh-Assam 200 km, Manipur-Burma 425 km, Mizoram-Bangladesh 275 km, Tripura-Bangladesh 625 km, Meghalaya - Bangladesh 400 km, (Total: 4825 km excluding Sikkim).

2. *East India Human Development Report*, National Council of Applied Economic Research, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, p.98.
3. *Ibid.*, p.99.
4. *Ibid.*, p.100 & UNDP 2000, 01,02,03 and 04, *Human Development Report*, OUP 2000, 012, 02, 03 and 04.
5. *Ibid.*, p.101.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p.102.
9. *Borderlines*, Vol. 1 No. 2, October 2004 p.31.  
Binalakshmi, Editor, opines that the Tripuris are starting arms struggle to flushed out and stop the influx of refugees.
10. n 4.
11. *The Seven Sisters of North East India: A Profile*, published on behalf of North East India Coordination Committee for the World Social Forum, 2004 by North Eastern Social Research Centre, 2004, Guwahati.
12. n 4.
13. Fourth World means those people whose representatives could not represent to UN as sovereign country.
14. Euthanasia means easy death. So Right to Euthanasia means right to easy death.
15. Internal self-determination is interpreted as a creation of a new state within the nation, External self-determination means sovereignty.  
If the aspirations of the hill people are to be conceptualised on a single scale, the measures would be called 'a quest for identity'. At one end of it is the demand for district autonomy within the existing states like Assam and Manipur. At the other are the movements for independence, which aim at a 'sovereign' countries. What is more important is to note that, although autonomy is a particular form of external relation, its need is felt at a particular stage in the internal development of a community and can never be an independent demand. Precisely because of this, the hill people of Tripura



are fighting for a constitutional guarantee for their land and the Kuki are identifying themselves with the statehood demand of Manipur and yet talking of district autonomy. Articulate public opinion in Meghalaya was not satisfied with the autonomous state which indeed separated it from Assam for all practical purposes. The nature of the political aspiration of the hill people would, therefore, have to be assessed in the context of the stages of socioeconomic development of the different groups. What appear to be 'tribal solidarity movements' have a definite socio-economic content. SK Chaube, *Hill Politics in North East India*, Orient Longman Limited, Patna, 1999, pp.244-245.

16. R. Gopalkrishnan, *The North-East India Land, Economy, and People*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1995, p.35.
17. Introduction by Fuller, in Major A. Playfair, *The Garos*, London, 1909, p.XIII.
18. Playfair *op.cit.* pp.10-16.
19. H. Bareth, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, Shillong 1967, p.35.
20. Gilchrist McCall, *Anthology Lushai Chrysalist*, London, 1949, p.26.
21. G.A. Grierson, in his report on the *Linguistic Survey of India* (Calcutta, 1904, Vol. III, part III Pp.6-8) insisted on a connection between the Kuki-Chin, the Meitei, the Bodo and the Naga language, all belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, but was inclined to regard Meitei in the broad category of Kuki-Chin languages.
22. Sachin Roy in his work, *Aspects of Padam-Minyong Culture*, Shillong, 1964, p.259, finds two different cultural strains in the north-western and the rest of the territory.
23. *Ibid.*, p.36.
24. *Ibid.*, p.38.
25. *Ibid.*, p.39
26. *Ibid.* Prof. J.N. Phukan stated that "the communities, who are inhabiting in all parts of NE, majority of them are Tai", in the National Seminar on "Ahom-Shan-Manipuri

- Diaspora, – In the 13<sup>th</sup> century” which was held on 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> Oct., 1998 at M.U.
27. S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assames Relations (1771 to 1826)*, Gauhati, 1949 p.301.
  28. Sanajaoba Naorem, *Manipur Treaties and Documents (1110-1971)* Vol. I, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1993 p.17. In the Treaty of Yandaboo, as far as Manipur is concerned it is maintained that “with regard to Manipore, it is stipulated that, should Gumbheer Singh desire to return to that country, he shall be recognized by the king of Ava as Rajah thereof (February 24, 1826)”.
  29. *Pemberton's Report 1835*.
  30. Alexander Mackenzie, Memorandum on the North East Frontier, 1869, cited in his *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontiers of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1884, p.369.
  31. J.M. Scott, *The Tea Story*, London, 1964.
  32. Mackenzie, *op.cit.*, p.88.
  33. Gopalkrishnan, *op.cit.*, p.33.
  34. Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam from 1883-1941*, Shillong, 1942, p.3 quoting DR Dyal, Commissioner, Chittagong Division.
  35. A.S. Reid, *Chin-Lushai Land*, London, 1893, p.1.
  36. Mackenzie, *op.cit.*, p.286.
  37. Gopalkrishnan, *op.cit.*, Pp.34-35.
  38. Dhanabir, L., *Political Participation in Manipur (1940-1984)*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis submitted to Department of Political Science, Canechipur: Manipur University, 1994, p.20.

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